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Testimony concerning Raised Bill No. 944: ***AN ACT CONCERNING A PLAN FOR ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL SUCCESS FOR EVERY MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT***

Submitted to the Education Committee
Connecticut General Assembly
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Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee. My name is Shannon Roberto and I am the President of the Parent Leadership Association, a resident of Enfield and a parent of three small children – one with special needs. I appreciate the opportunity to testify this afternoon in opposition to the Raised Bill No. 944. Specifically, I oppose the incorporation of the plan entitled "The Connecticut Plan: Academic and Personal Success for Every Middle and High School Student" ("the Plan") adopted by the State Board of Education on October 2, 2008, as the Plan is currently written.

I have reviewed the Plan adopted by the State Department of Education. I must acknowledge and commend the work of the *ad hoc* committee and the Department of Education. I believe it is important that Connecticut continuously evaluate methods to better prepare our students for adulthood. There are many positive aspects proposed under the Plan, including: using a multi-disciplinary approach to incorporating technology into the curriculum; standard of accountability and responsibility for students; and collaborations between secondary schools and businesses and secondary schools and community colleges. I am here today to bring to your attention some of the limitations of the Plan as it is currently written.

The Plan discusses in Engagement Component 3 (page 4), the expectations of special needs students under the Plan.

Students with a mild or moderate learning disability, who receive the additional support of an Individual Education Plan (IEP), are expected to meet the graduation requirements as stated in this plan... *There may be some modifications in the curriculum or in the assessment environment for this student*, but the basic expectations are the same as for non-special education students. [emphasis added]

The Plan provides for modifications of curriculum to those students that have a mild to moderate learning disability and an IEP. I submit to you that there are students in the education system who have a learning disability or other educational impairment, but do not have an IEP. As facilitator of a support group for families of children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder ("ADHD"), and as a parent of a child with ADHD, I assure you that while many children with ADHD have an education impairment – sometimes significant, many do not qualify for an IEP. These children, those who fall outside of the requirements for an IEP, are eligible for modifications to their education under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The Plan, as it is currently written does not provide for any modifications for students with a 504 Plan. I believe the Plan would be a significant detriment to students with

Testimony of Shannon Roberto
Page 2 of 3

learning difficulties who do not qualify for an IEP, and I ask the Education Committee to reflect on this when considering the Plan, as it is currently written.

Other aspects of the Plan that I ask the Education Committee to consider when evaluating whether the Plan sufficiently addresses all of Connecticut students and ensures their success to the greatest extent possible, include the following:

- How will the credit requirements, student success plan and capstone requirements be applied to a student entering the Connecticut public school system late in his/her secondary school career – this includes students transferring from parochial schools, students transferring from other states and military families?
- How will computers be made available to students who do not have access to a computer outside of the school setting? Increasing the number of required credits will decrease the number of study halls and free instruction time to students. Students who do not otherwise have the ability to access a computer outside of school will have limited opportunity to do so during school under the Plan.
- The Plan specifically incorporates parent involvement in the writing of the Student Success Plan and tacitly other ways. I ask you to consider those students who's parents are not (by choice) or cannot (because of environmental considerations) be involved in their children's education. The Plan seeks to close the achievement gap, but I believe that will not be realized through this means. In fact, it will serve to further frustrate those students already frustrated by the fact that he/she is at a disadvantage because his/her parent(s) cannot or will not be involved. This will further highlight an existing problem – not solve it.

The Plan seeks to create a society of students engaged and ready for the 21st century. It also seeks to close the achievement gap and minimizing (down to zero) the high school drop out rate. For some of the reasons expressed in this testimony, I do not believe the Plan will achieve its goals. I ask the Education Committee to ask the State Department of Education to explore alternative methods to school reform, which may include the following:

- *Expanding the current education system from a 10 month cycle to a 12 month cycle*

This would benefit all students, not just students in grades 6-12 (or 14 as the Plan outlines). Teachers spend a significant amount of time re-teaching material forgotten over the summer months. A continuous education system would cut down on much of the re-teaching/re-learning of material. Less time spent re-teaching will allow teachers to progress through lesson plans at a faster pace. Additionally, more efficient use of classroom instruction time would present an opportunity for school districts to incorporate more of the "specials" instruction – art, music, computer science and physical education, resulting in well-rounded, creative, engaged students.

- *Incorporating the use of online and distance learning programs to those students who cannot thrive in a traditional classroom environment*

Testimony of Shannon Roberto
Page 3 of 3

Not all students learn in the same way nor can all children function in a traditional classroom setting. Many students who are unable to function in a traditional classroom setting are sent to alternative education programs and many ultimately drop out of school. As you know, many colleges offer distance and on-line courses, and incorporate periodic in-person discussions to solidify the student's understanding of the material and evaluate student performance. This model would allow struggling students another vehicle to complete the high school graduation requirements.

- *Improving instruction and overall classroom experience*

The *ad hoc* committee discussed in the Plan the need for students to learn "higher order thinking" skills. I agree. It begs the question, though, whether additional statutory requirements (e.g., assessments, testing, reporting, etc.) as set forth in the Plan is the best way to achieve that outcome. It would be more beneficial for our teachers to be trained in how to incorporate Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory into instruction and how to guide our students toward critical thinking. I ask the Education Committee to consider a "bottom up" approach (i.e., training to teachers about alternative teaching styles), rather than an administrative "top-down" approach (i.e., administrative regulations) as proposed by the Plan. Ensure that our teachers are trained in facilitating classroom discussions, special interests projects, self-guided learning.

I ask the Education Committee to reject the Plan – the Plan as it is currently written will not accomplish the mission for which it was designed. I ask that you please give serious consideration to alternative methods for closing the achievement gap and minimizing the high school drop out rate. I ask the Education Committee give due consideration the positive attributes, the strengths of the Plan, but the Education Committee must also reconsider those areas where the Plan is lacking, and consider alternative methods.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

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